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NATIVE ACCOUNT OF THE MEETING BETWEEN LA PEROUSE AND THE TLINGIT

By G. T. EMMONS

LITUYA BAY is a deep, narrow inlet penetrating the American mainland just beyond that point where the broken, rocky part of the north Pacific coast gives place to the broad, sandy shore of the Gulf of Alaska. Originally the bed of a great glacier it has long since been taken possession of by the sea, that floods and ebbs through its restricted entrance with a force that makes it the most justly dreaded harbor on the Pacific coast. At its head it branches into two arms, at right angles to the original course, which receive much ice from a number of active glaciers. The narrow mouth is still further contracted by half submerged ledges and sand spits that extend from either shore, and the constant warfare of the ocean waves and tidal currents have formed a bar, over which the rollers break with terrific force, and, except in fair weather, at slack water, the passage is fraught with extreme peril. Within, the calm is almost supernatural, the mirror-like surface of the water, protected by steep, high shores, is unaffected by winds from any quarter, and reflects with the truth of reality the translucent ice tints of the floating bergs as they are carried hither and thither by each recurring tide. These peculiar conditions in times past attracted the sea otter in great numbers, and, notwithstanding the dangerous waters, this has always been a favorite hunting ground of the natives from Chatham Straits to Dry Bay.

Lituya is a compound word in the Tlingit language meaning "the lake within the point," and the place is so called from the almost enclosed water within the extended spit. On the maps of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it appears variously as Port Française, Altona, Alituya, Ltooa, as well as Lituya.

Like primitive peoples elsewhere the Tlingit endowed all nature with spirit life, and so accounted for the many mysteries that compassed them about. In their imagination, the glacier

was the child of the mountains, born in regions of eternal snow, and, when its arch-enemy the sun looks down to destroy it, the parents tear the rocks from their sides and scatter them over the surface for protection; in the scintillating aurora they saw the warrior spirits at play in the highest heaven; and when nature was at its best the spirit of the tree and the rock came forth as the shadow and slept upon the calm waters. And so the legend of Lituya tells of a monster of the deep who dwells in the ocean caverns near the entrance. He is known as Kah Lituya, "the Man of Lituya." He resents any approach to his domain, and all of those whom he destroys become his slaves, and take the form of bears, and from their watch towers on the lofty mountains of the Mt Fairweather range they herald the approach of canoes, and with their master they grasp the surface water and shake it as if it were a sheet, causing the tidal waves to rise and engulf the unwary.

It can be seen how this phenomenon appealed to the Tlingit, as of all deaths that by drowning was alone dreaded. The end might come in any other way and he met it unflinchingly, with perfect resignation. But his crude belief in a future life of comfort and warmth required that the body be cremated, while, if lost in the water, its spirit must ever remain in subjection to some evil power.

This legend of Lituya is illustrated by a carved wooden pipe (fig. 50),¹ of splendid proportions, which was obtained in 1888 from the chief of the Tuck-tane-ton family of the Hoon-ah Kow, who claimed this bay as his hereditary sea-otter hunting ground. It was used only upon occasions of particular ceremony—when the clan assembled to honor the dead, or to deliberate upon some important question of policy. At one end is shown a frog-like figure with eyes of haliotis shell, which represents the Spirit of Lituya, at the other end the bear slave sitting up on his haunches. Between them they hold the entrance of the bay, and the two brass-covered ridges are the tidal waves they have raised, underneath which, cut out of brass, is a canoe with two occupants, that has been engulfed.

In 1786 La Perouse, the French navigator, in his exploration of the Northwest Coast to the southward of Bering Bay, when abreast of the Fairweather Mountains, descried an opening in the

¹ This illustration was furnished through the courtesy of Mr George G. Heye, in whose collection the pipe now is.

shore which his boats entered and reported as an available anchorage. The following day he stood in for the entrance, which he had hardly gained, when the wind hauled ahead, and, notwithstanding he shivered his sails and threw all aback, he was carried in by the irresistible force of the flood, and narrowly escaped shipwreck. He

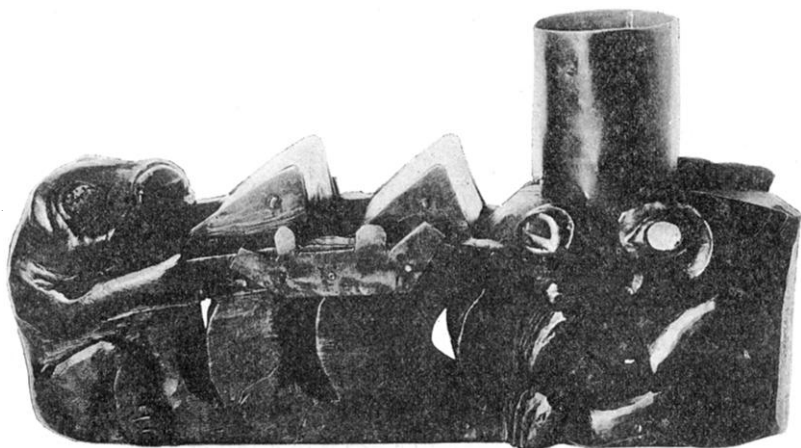


FIG. 50.—Pipe illustrating the myth of Lituya Bay.

remained here twenty-six days making observations, surveying, and trading with the natives. He gave to the bay the name of Port des Françaises and his minute description of the country and its inhabitants forms one of the most pleasing and exact records that has come down to us from any of the early narrators. But his visit was made most memorable by the loss of two of his boats and their crews of twenty-one officers and men, in their attempted reconnaissance of the mouth of the bay.

In 1886, one hundred years after this event, Cowee, the principal chief of the Auk qwan of the Tlingit people, living at Sinta-ka-heenee, on Gastineaux Channel, told me the story of the first meeting of his ancestors with the white man, in Lituya Bay, where two boats of the strangers were upset and many of them were drowned. This narrative had been handed down by word of mouth for a century. These people possess no records nor had the chief, who spoke no word of our tongue, ever heard of La Perouse from

outside sources; so we can here authenticate by an exact date a most interesting piece of native history in detail, the truth of which is substantiated by the fact that La Perouse was the only one of the early navigators to visit this locality in a large ship and by the attending loss of life in the destruction of his two boats.

Before the coming of the white man, when the natives had no iron, the Chilkat and Hoon-ah made long canoe trips each summer to Yakutat, to trade with the Thlar-har-yeek for copper, which was fashioned into knives, spears, ornaments, and tinneh¹ and which again were exchanged with the more southern tribes for cedar canoes, chests, food boxes, and dishes.

One spring a large party of Thluke-nah-hut-tees from the great village of Kook-noo-ow on Icy Straits, started north, under the leadership of three chiefs—Chart-ah-sixh, Lth-kah-teech, and Yan-yoosh-tick.

In entering Lituya, four canoes were swallowed by the waves and Chart-ah-sixh was drowned. The survivors made camp and mourned for their lost companions. While these ceremonies were being enacted, two ships came into the bay. The people did not know what they were, but believed them to be great black birds with far reaching white wings, and, as their bird creator, Yehlh, often assumed the form of a raven, they thought that in this guise he had returned to earth, so in their fright they fled to the forest and hid. Finding after a while that no harm came to them, they crept to the shore and, gathering leaves of the skunk cabbage, they rolled them into rude telescopes and looked through them, for to see Yehlh with the naked eye was to be turned to stone.

As the sails came in and the sailors climbed the rigging and ran out on the yards, in their imagination they saw but the great birds folding their wings and flocks of small black messengers rising from their bodies and flying about. These latter they believed to be crows, and again in fear they sought the shelter of the woods.

One family of warriors, bolder than the rest, put on their heavy coats of hide, the wooden collar and fighting head-dress, and, armed with the copper knife, spear, and bow, launched a war canoe.

¹ The well-known "coppers" or shield-like pieces that might be considered as money, and which had a fixed value in accordance with their size.

But scarcely had they cleared the beach when a cloud of smoke rose from the strange apparition followed by a voice of thunder, which so demoralized them that the canoe was overturned and the occupants scrambled to the shore as best they could.

Now one nearly blind old warrior gathered the people together, and said, that his life was far behind him and for the common good he would see if Yehlh would turn his children to stone, so he told his slaves to prepare his canoe, and, putting on a robe of the sea otter, he embarked and paddled seaward. But as he approached the ships the slaves lost heart and would turn back, and all deserted him save two, who finally placed him alongside. He climbed on board, but being hardly able to distinguish objects, the many black forms moving about still appeared as crows, and the cooked rice that they set before him to eat looked like worms, and he feared to touch it. He exchanged his coat of fur for a tin pan and with presents of food he returned to the shore. When he landed the people crowded about surprised to see him alive, and they touched him and smelled of him to see if it were really he, but they could not be persuaded to eat the strange food that he had brought to them.

After much thought the old man was convinced that it was not Yehlh that he had gone to and that the black figures must be people, so the natives, profiting by his experience, visited the ships and exchanged their furs for many strange articles.

It was at this time that two boats were lost at the mouth of the bay and many of the white men were drowned.

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